Humbled by The Mighty Deer Mouse

Troublemaker in the record boxes?

Bruce Babbitt, secretary of the Department of Interior (DOI), was scheduled to go on trial this week for contempt of court for failing to produce a batch of records demanded by Native Americans—and Babbitt's staff is blaming the fiasco on the unhealthy habits of the North American deer mouse.

Babbitt and DOI are being sued by Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfoot tribe, and others who claim they haven't received the right payment for lands held in trust by the government since 1887. Tens of billions of dollars may be at stake, according to Cobell's attorney, Robert Peregoy. The court ordered DOI to surrender records on the matter 2 years ago, but DOI is still struggling to comply.

Why? DOI staffers say they can't touch the files because they're contaminated with mouse droppings, which might contain the deadly hantavirus.

Babbitt's people don't actually know what's been nesting in the records, but they fear it may be the deer mouse. That's a danger, DOI attorneys argued in December before Judge Royce Lamberth of the Washington, D.C., federal district court, because the mouse is a notorious carrier of hantavirus, which has killed more than 200 Americans since 1993. DOI attorneys even summoned hantavirus expert Terry Yates, a biologist at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, to testify that he had recommended that a biosafety S.W.A.T. team handle tens of thousands of DOI record boxes now held in an Albuquerque warehouse. Decontamination could take months, he said.

Government attorneys pleaded for mercy at a hearing on 6 January, asking Judge Lamberth for a delay while they cleaned up the files. But Lamberth said the contempt trial would begin as planned on 11 January.

Seeing White Elephants

The dream of a Thai veterinarian to revive a symbol of the country's royal past by cloning a dead white elephant took on a life of its own last week in the world press. But the story is too good to be true—at least with current technology.

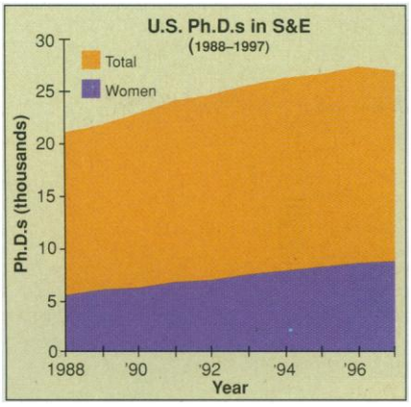
Veterinarian Chisanu Tiyacharoensrias, vice president of the private, Bangkok-based Wild Animal Rescue Foundation of Thailand, works with a 10-year project to conserve Thailand's dwindling elephant herds. A successful effort, he enthusiastically told a reporter from the English-language *Bangkok Post*, might someday link up with the latest cloning techniques and lead to the reappearance of herds of white elephants like the legendary one owned more than a century ago by King Rama III, parts of which are still preserved in alcohol. The paper took the ball and ran with it, reporting that scientists at the country's prestigious Mahidol University were launching a 10-year program to clone Rama's pickled white elephant. The Associated Press, the BBC, and the *London Times* soon picked up the story.

"Somebody must have said something that was misunderstood by the *Bangkok Post*," says Pornchai Matangkasombut, dean of Mahidol's Faculty of Science. Cloning dead animals is impossible with current technology, explains Yukio Tsunoda, a professor of animal reproduction at Kinki University in Nara, Japan, who has successfully cloned adult cattle. Nuclear transfer techniques depend on the cell nucleus being intact—which is unlikely in dead tissue. But he concedes it is theoretically possible, as DNA itself can remain intact in properly preserved tissue.

That glimmer of hope is enough for Tiyacharoensrias. "It's a dream," he says. "Maybe not in 10 years, [but] maybe in 20 or 50 years."

Women Inch Toward Parity in Science

The number of women getting U.S. doctoral degrees in science and engineering continues to grow despite the first decline in this decade in overall Ph.D. production. The latest figures from the National Science Foundation (NSF) show that the total number of Ph.D.s granted in 1997 by U.S. institutions fell from 27,230 in 1996 to 26,847 in 1997. But both the number and percentage of women are going up—they captured almost 33% of the degrees in 1997, compared to 27% in 1988. Their presence within specific fields varies greatly, however. The female share of engineering Ph.D.s has plateaued at around 12%, while they got almost 39% of the science Ph.D.s, up from 32% in 1988. Long dominant in fields such as nutrition, women in this decade have pulled ahead in biostatistics, developmental biology, endocrinology, and parasitology.



Meanwhile, the number of non–U.S. citizens getting Ph.D.s fell to 9209 in 1997 after peaking at 10,542 in 1994. Figures are from NSF's annual Survey of Earned Doctorates (www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/srs99406/start.htm).

Watson Speaks Out for DNA

Nobel laureate James Watson burnished his reputation for outspokenness this month. Addressing the Genome Summit of the Indian Science Congress in Chennai (Madras) on 5 January, the biologist defended genetic engineering as "a very safe technology" and attacked critics, declaring, "Let the Greens walk into the sea." He added, "The only person who has been harmed by DNA is Bill Clinton."

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